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An Archeologist on San Miguel Island

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The Indians continued to live on the island until the early part of the 19th century, when they were removed by the Spanish Fathers and scattered among the mainland missions.

From the mid-19th century until 1942 San Miguel was used as a sheep-grazing range. In 1850 George Nidever established himself there and built an adobe hut, the collapsing remains of which we photographed in a small canyon. The lease of the island passed through several hands until Robert L. Brooks procured its use from the Navy in 1916. In the late 1920's Herbert Lester came to San Miguel as ranch manager for Brooks. Lester, his wife and two daughters lived in a large ranch house built around 1900 and were content in their isolation. In 1942, fearful that the Navy would evict him, Lester shot himself. He was buried on Devil's Knoll overlooking Cuyler Harbor. His wife and children left, and the island was never inhabited again, except sporadically by

Navy personnel.

Collection of aboriginal artifacts has been going on since the white man first took possession. The sheep-raisers, casual visitors, knowledgeable pot-hunters and others found ample material as they were constantly exposed on the surface by strong winds. The first recorded archeological expedition was financed by the Smithsonian Institution in 1875; it was led by Paul Schumacher. In four days he excavated a cemetery with about 250 burials. He left because he found the sand, wind, and weather too inhospitable for work.

Intermittent excavations were later made by several enthusiastic collectors, but no reports of their efforts or findings have been written. The next official excavation was sponsored by the Heye Foundation, Museum of the American Indian, New York, in 1919. During a six month period they uncovered 343 burials and thousands of beads, ornaments, stone and bone tools. These have



As an archeologist interested in the aboriginal populations of California, I found the recent work on San Miguel Island an exciting opportunity to pursue scientific studies with challenges seldom met on mainland excavations.

A unique association with the expedition was offered by Dr. Charles Rozaire, Curator of Archeology, Los Angeles County Museum, when he asked me to direct his field laboratory on the island in the summer of 1964. The project was sponsored by the Museum Associates of the Los Angeles County Museum through a contract with the National Park Service. Its purpose was to make a thorough survey of the island's archeological resources, plot them on a master map, and eventually excavate some of those areas showing promise. The data derived from this field work will clarify the cultural and chronological picture of the indigenous inhabitants and their relationships to mainland groups of Indians.

In planning for this program I became interested in the varied and fascinating history of this small, wind-swept foggy, sandy waste with only low-growing, sparse vegetation. The island, slightly over eight miles in length and four miles in width, lies 43 miles southwest of Santa Barbara, and is the most westerly of the four northern Channel Islands. It is now uninhabited and owned by the U.S. Navy.

The first white man to visit San Miguel was Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, who discovered it on October 18, 1542 and named it La Posesion. Cabrillo died on January 3, 1543 while wintering on the island and was presumably buried there near Cuyler Harbor. His remains have never been found.

The Spanish made many notes of the island's inhabitants, and their journals state that the Indians called their home Ciquimuymu. Three large villages were noted but only two named: Zaco and Nimollollo. Over the next 250 years

various explorers mentioned the island, and from time to time its name was changed. In 1792 from the Admiralty charts prepared by Vancouver, the English explorer, the name of San Miguel was finally confirmed.

San Miguel Island was inhabited by one of the Chumash groups whose range extended along the mainland from Malibu Canyon north to Estero Bay. Their remains have also been found on Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, and Aanacapa Islands. The Spaniards regarded the Chumash highly and commented on their superior material, technological and economic development compared with other California Indians. Particularly noted was their beautiful work in shell ornamentation, their fine basketry, and their excellent plank canoes—symbol of their maritime efficiency. The friendliness and hospitality of the Chumash probably had much to do with Cabrillo's decision to winter among them on San Miguel Island.



been described and pictured in a Heye Foundation monograph.

What then is left? Constant wind erosion hastened by over-grazing, extended and often unscientific collecting in the past, and continued illegal pot-hunting in the present have not, fortunately, exhausted all the island's archeological potential. Under Dr. Rozaire's guidance, the Museum survey crew has recorded over 100 concentrations of cultural debris, as well as several possible village and camp sites. During the month spent on the island our excavation crew dug in a small, undisturbed village site and the work is now nearing completion.

The crew numbered as high as 30 during the last two weeks of the expedition. The largest individual contingent was composed of college students training for careers in anthropology. Several of the students were from the University of California at Los Angeles; others came from as widely separated institutions of learning as Yale, the University of Southern California, the University of Wisconsin, Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, the University of California at Berkeley, and numerous State Colleges in the Southern California area. Interested volunteers were recruited from local archeological societies, Museum Alliance members, and students in the life sciences. A surveyor, 2 trained photographers, a map-maker and 2 cooks were also part of the regular crew.

The logistics of manning an expedition to San Miguel Island were extremely complicated. As the island had no resources, all personal gear, food, water, scientific equipment, etc. had to either be flown in or come the long way by boat to Cuyler Harbor. Only occasionally was it necessary to go by boat when an exciting beach landing would occur and then followed by a long, steep, narrow climb to the housing and site area above. Fortunately, for the most part, helicopters from the U.S. Navy base at Point Mugu and the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro came to our aid and patiently and efficiently flew a wide assortment of gear, supplies and personnel back and forth to the island. We were certainly grateful for the splendid, competent crews and administrative personnel whose cheerful and generous cooperation saved us much precious time for carry-



ing on the scientific work and rescued us from many back-breaking hours that otherwise would have been spent trudging up and down the coastal cliffs, lugging hundreds of pounds of materials up to the site and living quarters.

The living quarters! Picture the old Lester home now: dilapidated, win-

dows broken, screens completely rusted, boards warped, doors off their hinges, shingles playing their cacophonies in the never-ceasing wind. Here, the hardy crew cleaned, swept, mended, boarded windows, hung doors, carried out many years' accumulations of squatters' trash, and made sleeping quarters in the long-



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TOP LEFT: The Navy helicopter from the U.S. Naval Air Station at Point Mugu makes its weekly visit to bring supplies.

BOTTOM LEFT: Dr. Charles Rozaire in hood screens on a very windy afternoon as George Kritzman shovels midden into the screen. The village site was only a short walk from the living quarters and kitchen-lab building.

BOTTOM MIDDLE: Phoebe Thirkield, anthropology major from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. She is recording her field notes on the pit she has been excavating.

TOP RIGHT: Freddie Curtis, the author, sorting excavated materials in the laboratory.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Excavation work in progress at the site. Pit in foreground is staked out ready for excavation.

abandoned, sadly sagging edifice with its scampering, nocturnal, almost omnivorous white-footed mice. No running water, no gas or electricity, no modern sanitary facilities—only bed-rolls, lanterns, and the “outhouse.”

We used an old Navy structure near the ranch house as kitchen and labora-

tory. Here the cooks grappled with water in short supply, lack of fuel for the stoves, delay in the arrival of fresh food from the mainland when fog inhibited the arrival of the helicopter, and hungry, hungry diggers. Here I set up my lab to process the daily excavated material.

A cursory examination of the materials already collected indicates the singularly interesting adaptation these island people made to their marine environment. The large amounts of abalone and mussel shells show their dependence upon the ocean's resources at hand. The numerous fish and sea mammal bones, and the fishing tools indicate a technological know-how to procure protein foods from the deeper waters. The many stone tools, used in the processing of vegetal food and in the capture and utilization of land and sea fauna, still remain to be analyzed typologically. The non-utilitarian objects such as shell beads, stone ornaments, and possible ceremonial material, also await study.

Detailed analyses are planned for molluscan, bird, fish, and mammal remains. The final report should present a valuable commentary on the life of this village's inhabitants. The artifacts, together with large samples of the lithic, floral, faunal, and molluscan materials recovered, will remain with the Los Angeles County Museum. This collection will serve as valuable research material for all those interested in California archeology, as well as for those

concerned with adaptation of peoples to an island economy.

The barren island is not without charm. On its mouse-riddled surface grows a large variety of small flowering plants, cactus, and fragrant bushes; in the spring it is truly delightful. Once the clammy, earth-hugging fog has lifted and the head-protecting hood and gloves can be removed, the sun warms the air quickly. The ocean below sparkles, the nearly tame miniature fox comes to visit inquisitively, the fearless birds hop along nearly underfoot as you walk about the pits, and the hills and dunes beckon—until the afternoon fog rolls in again and chills the wind-swept air.

And the digging! Such black, black dirt! In a matter of minutes the soil from the shaking screens covers every exposed bit of skin, clogging the nostrils and ears and making goggles necessary for the eyes. The wind never stops blowing and one is always downwind from somebody else's shaking screens. Were there hot showers it would scarcely matter. But with water so terribly scarce, meal time sees the diggers dipping fingers into basins of already dusky-colored liquid and wiping them on already soiled towels.

The damp! Clothes seem never to dry. Even if the energy is available to make the long, steep trip down the dunes to the beach to bathe and wash clothes (after work, of course, or on Sunday), the damp seems to keep heavy levis, woolen socks and towels from ever really feeling dry. In the morning everything is damp and clothes are clammy to the touch. The solution: sleep in them, of course, or stuff them, wrinkled and dirty into the sleeping bag with you to keep them dry, and crawl back into them upon awakening.

A short week-end of such living conditions might be fun. But, it requires a great deal of dedication to go on day after day for weeks being dirty, feeling damp and earthy, and missing the newspapers, telephone, T.V., mail from home, and a balanced diet. It is to Dr. Rozaire's credit that, in spite of all the difficulties, foreseen and unforeseen, friction never developed, good humor prevailed, and the highest standards of excavation and laboratory analysis were always met.

Should another summer of excavation be done, we will all be glad to return and assist in the completion of the work.



ABOVE: Rosemary Stern checks her luggage among everything piled outside waiting for the helicopters to take the expedition members and their gear back to the mainland after a month's work.

LEFT: Cuyler Harbor and Prince Island shrouded in fog. Abalone abound on the rocks at the east end of the harbor.



ABOVE: *The crew of workers in front of the Ranch House on San Miguel Island.*

BELOW: *Dr. Charles Rozaire, Director of the site work, discusses the archeological work with Roberta Greenwood (Mrs. Lee Greenwood).*

